

Process plods on to select new Pierce County District Court judge

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The slow-motion process of filling an empty judicial seat in Pierce County's largest court takes another step Wednesday, with no clear date for a final decision.

Members of an ad-hoc committee appointed by the County Council will interview five candidates who hope to become the newest judge in Pierce County District Court. The committee meeting, which is open to the public, starts at 3 p.m.

The judicial position pays \$141,000 annually. Collectively, the court's eight judges handle more than 175,000 cases per year, chiefly misdemeanors and traffic violations.

"That's not a small deal," said District Court Judge Pat O'Malley, one of seven sitting judges who will work with the new arrival. "That's why it's important to have a public buy-in. I hope we eventually have a candidate who will do us good."

The seat has been empty since January, when former District Court Judge Jack Nevin moved up to Pierce County Superior Court. A total of 19 applicants initially sought the position; that number has since dropped to 17.

A subcommittee of the Tacoma-Pierce County Bar Association recently rated the 17 candidates' qualifications and passed the ratings on to County Council members, who handed the information to the council's ad-hoc committee.

The composition of the ad-hoc committee sparked a minor controversy in the legal community last fall. Legal leaders worried that the bar association was being marginalized in favor of the prosecutor's office.

Subsequently, the ad-hoc committee was reshuffled. It now includes six members:

- **Susan Long**, attorney for the county council.
- **Margaret Ross**, the district court's presiding judge.
- **Stephanie Bloomfield**, president of the bar association.
- **Jared Ausserer**, deputy prosecutor.
- **Gina Duncan**, president of the Tacoma-Pierce County Minority Bar Association.
- A citizen representative, **Tom Pierson**, president of the Tacoma-Pierce County Chamber of Commerce.

Eventually, County Council members will select the new judge after they receive recommendations from the ad-hoc committee. The question is when. The answer is uncertain.

"We don't have a timeline," said Long. "We don't have any date set. Tomorrow could be our last meeting. Tomorrow could not be our last meeting. We could well decide to interview more candidates."

For the moment, the interview list holds firm at five candidates:

- **Kevin McCann**, a deputy prosecutor. McCann ran unsuccessfully for district court judge in 2010 (Claire Sussman won the seat.) Bar Association rating: exceptionally well qualified.
- **G. Helen Whitener**, a defense attorney and former deputy prosecutor who has also served as a pro tem judge in district court. Whitener ran unsuccessfully for Superior Court Judge in 2012 (Stan Rumbaugh won the seat.) Bar Association rating: exceptionally well qualified.
- **Grace Kingman**, a deputy prosecutor. Bar Association rating: well qualified.
- **Cynthia Chen-Weller**, an attorney based in Milton. Bar Association rating: well qualified.

- **W. Stephen Gregorich**, a veteran attorney based in University Place who has served as a deputy prosecutor and public defender. Bar Association rating: qualified.

The interview list does not include Karl Williams, a University Place attorney who has served as a pro tem judge in District Court since 1996. Williams ran unsuccessfully for a District Court seat in 2010. Apart from McCann and Whitener, he was the only applicant to receive an “exceptionally well qualified” rating from the bar association.

However, the ratings arrived after the ad-hoc committee selected five candidates to interview.

Tuesday, Long said the recent delivery of the ratings could extend the interview process; that will depend on the views of other committee members. The minority bar association also rated candidates recently and passed those ratings on to the County Council.

“It could very well influence what we decide to do tomorrow, and whether we need more time to talk to other candidates,” Long said.

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